

Love affair with all things Hawaiian is

Japan's Agnes Kimura detoured from singing to career in slack-key

BY WAYNE HARADA

Advertiser Entertainment Writer

En route to becoming a jazz singer more than three decades ago, Japanese songstress Agnes Kimura encountered a detour — Polynesian dancing — that would ultimately lead to a career playing Hawaiian slack-key guitar.

Today, Kimura is the top kī hō'alu stylist in her native Japan

FIVE QUESTIONS

and the lone foreigner performing in Sunday's Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Festival at Kapi'olani Park Bandstand.

She also is the lone artist, among the 20 or so strumming, who has an anthology CD release pegged to the event here (see Island Sounds, Page 20), with a second album of slack-key for her hometown fans.

With the help of interpreter Naomi Ogawa, Kimura answered Five Questions:

Q. You have become an ambassador of aloha and music in Japan, with your Hawaiian music recordings and performances. What first drew you to Island music, 30 years ago?

A. First, it was dancing. It was Tahitian dancing. I was dreaming about becoming a jazz singer, and I was introduced to sing at a Polynesian show club in Tokyo by the instructor who gave me lessons. I was singing jazz with piano. ... Since I was really young at that time, I wanted to dance with that music. At the same time, I learned Hawaiian music and dancing as well. Then two years later, I made my debut as a Hawaiian band singer and a Polynesian dancer.

Q. You play slack-key guitar; who has been your inspiration? Your teachers? Or was this something you learned by listening?

A. My first slack-key guitar instructor was Nobuo Mitsuhashi, who was a band leader of Hawaiian music in Japan. Then I took lessons from Ozzie Kotani, the second time I performed at the Slack Key Guitar Festival. I really thank two of my teachers now. I create my own style of slack-key,



Japan's top slack-key guitarist, Agnes Kimura, will be joined by Noboru Matsumoto, another giant of the genre, when she performs Sunday in the 26th annual Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Festival.

which is sometimes with two fingers or three fingers.

Q. What slack-key sound and style do you like? What goes through your mind as you play a Hawaiian song? And how does this compare or contrast with the Japanese songs and music that you still perform?

A. When I listen to those slack-key CDs, I hear the sound of players' breathing, humming; scratches from its playing and even some rustles. I think all of these reveal their own "life" that they had with their own style and their own sound. For me, this is the most fascinating allure of slack-key guitar. When I play either Hawaiian music or Japanese music, I feel it is basically the same. But when I play instrumental only, the words of the songs come up in my mind ... the background of the songs. When I play Lili'uokalani's songs, I cannot help thinking of the author's fate, and I really feel strained and thrilled with respect.

Q. What about the Hawaiian language? How did you learn and get comfortable with Hawaiian lyrics? How do you approach an Island song — do you try to learn the meaning of the words that you sing as you strum guitar?

A. I listen to records and tapes over and over again. Thirty years ago, we couldn't get any correct Hawaiian words of the songs, so I bought a Hawaiian-language dictionary and looked up the words. I think I was strict with myself ... to study the language. I understand that people who are

in Hawaiian music in Hawai'i feel the same as this. Today we can receive the correct lyrics and their meaning in Japan because hula is booming. I often play 'ukulele at hō'ike and hula competitions, and now I am confident to sing in the Hawaiian language. However, I understand there are so many implications or hidden meaning in Hawaiian songs, so it is still difficult for me. I know it is necessary to learn Hawaiian history and legends. Since I am not a scholar, it is challenging for me! For many Japanese, it is not that difficult to read and pronounce the Hawaiian language (compared to Westerners) so I think this is one of the reasons hula is booming in Japan. I simply love the nuance of the Hawaiian language, which sounds so tender to me. I think my task is to sing the best I can.

Q. You are giving a workshop on slack-key while you are in Hawai'i. In Japan, are you a sensei? Do you teach what you've learned to folks who want to perform slack-key, too?

A. I teach 'ukulele in Japan now, but I used to teach slack-key guitar privately. This time I will bring Noboru Matsumoto as my support member to teach at the workshop (earlier this week) and also perform at the festival. He has 30 students in Japan; he also published a lesson booklet in Japan and conveys the allure of the instrument to Japanese people.

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HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY KĪ HŌ'ALU 2008, O'AHU

11 a.m.-6 p.m. Sunday
Kapi'olani Park Bandstand
Free

226-2697, www.slackkeyfest.com

Featuring: Kaukahi, Ledward Ka'apana, Agnes Kimura, Paul Togioka, Owana Salazar, Maunaloa, T. Mike Kaawa, Brother Noland, Kotani, Kenneth Keawe

Slack-key veteran gr

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Here's the kī hō'alu buzz, from Milton Lau, organizer of Sunday's Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Festival, and presenter of such events not just on O'ahu but the Neighbor Islands:

• **The kid who might be the future of slack key:** Timi Abrial, 13, from Maui. "He can do so guitar, has a mom and dad to support his music, is thinking relocating to O'ahu and he's pretty talented," said Lau. "A prodigy of George Kahumoku and Ozzie Kotani, mostly. Reminds me a lot of when Makana was starting out as the 'Kī hō'alu Kid.'"

• **Super trouper:** Speaking of Makana, a festival participant who has been selected as a finalist in Guitar Player's Guitar Superstar Competition on Sept. 13 in San Francisco. "He's one of a kind and the only one from Hawaii and the first kī hō'alu player competing with jazz and blues guitarists."

• **A newbie with a good strum:**



Ledward Ka'apana will be among the performers.